



## Jean-Luc Godard's Half-Truths

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"Je suis un faux peintre,  
je suis un faux artiste,  
je suis un photographe."

—J.-L.G.

Few new cineastes have made such a shattering entry into the seventh art as Godard, and few have provoked such extreme reactions. Jean Cocteau, Jean-Paul Sartre, Sophia Loren, and Harvard University all radiated an unfeigned enthusiasm for *Breathless*. This miracle has just been repeated with his last picture, *Le Mépris*. Badly received in Italy, it has

triumphed in France; the celebrated writer Louis Aragon declares that he has seen nothing to equal it since Chaplin. By contrast, however, Godard's other films, like *Une Femme est Une Femme* or *Les Carabiniers*, have been total flops with both critics and public, even though in many respects they were clearly superior to the first two mentioned.

The paradoxical fact is that this Swiss-born director combines, in a sense, practically the whole of French cinema, old and new. It

would be easy to cite what links him with René Clair or Jean Renoir, Jean Vigo or Abel Gance, Alain Resnais or François Truffaut. Advocate of style above all, Godard thinks cinema as he breathes. If, he said to me several years back, some accident should make it impossible for him to direct films, well, he would continue to see them, discuss them with his friends, and he would be happy. But this admirable profession of faith conceals another important facet of his character: Godard is fascinated by literature, poetry, beautiful language, Aragon, Cocteau, Malraux, and himself possesses great talent as a writer, with an acute sense for the value of the written word. A third point about him is that, before entering the cinema, he studied ethnology; and, unlike many European film-makers, he traveled adventurously, assisting various amateur film-makers who present their travel films under the auspices of the *Connaissance du Monde* in Paris. Lastly, like John Osborne, Godard has a social conscience, making him despair of living in an era when, as Jimmy Porter says in *Look Back in Anger*, there are no more good causes worth sacrificing oneself for. (Whence *Le Petit Soldat*.)

Jean-Luc Godard is erratic, tormented, uncertain—not only of his own reactions, his own sensibility, but of the means to use in expressing himself. His career is a reflection of these contradictions. It reveals a temperament which is at the same time curious to know everything, to try everything, and also incapable of being settled, of going to the bottom of things, of looking reality in the face. Hence his frequent resort to a kind of verbal delirium.

*Godard as a man of letters:* Godard has an active concern for language, spoken or written. He knows how to write and speak. His little-known short, *Charlotte and Her Jules* (1958, with Jean-Paul Belmondo) remains to

this day perhaps his most astonishing work, and the most revealing about his aesthetic direction. A young man, often crude in speech, delivers a long monologue to a girl-friend who has just come to find him in his room; he explains all the reasons why she should love him, despite his bad treatment of her. Godard took over whole the idea of the “Bel Indifferent” of Jean Cocteau (who really created the stage role of Edith Piaf). This enabled him to say what he thought of the cinema, of women, of love. Made for \$1,000, and shot one afternoon in Godard’s own room, the film had to be postsynchronized by Godard himself in Belmondo’s absence. The result is extraordinary, even if the synchronization is sometimes inexact: Godard is a prodigious story-teller, like Cocteau or Guitry. He knows how to make fictions true. “At home,” he told me (he is the son of a big bourgeois family in Lausanne), “we had the habit of reading together in the evenings. That’s how I developed a taste for recitation aloud.”

Godard’s montage, not only in *Charlotte and Her Jules* but in all his films, was to be organized around the dialogue, which often enough would be spoken in a deliberately unrealistic fashion. In *Charlotte* Godard cut into the monologue with brief unanswered questions to the girl, who could only reply “Ah!” “Oh!” “Non!” or else make some silly gesture with her head. One may easily see the same abrupt cutting, built on the sentence rhythms, in the famous bed scene in *Breathless*, and more recently though less successfully in a similar scene in *Le Mépris*, when the camera frames Bardot in close-up against the white bathroom wall, and lets her say, with the greatest expressive force one could desire, several words calculated to shock the puritan.

*Godard as Brechtian:* Hoping to recapture the conciseness of writing, yet not denying the realistic solidity which speech acquires on the screen, Godard fears like the plague all the traps of realism. He likes to cite Brecht himself: “Realism does not consist in reproducing reality, but in showing how things *really* are.”

◀ (Opposite page) Godard directing American actor Jack Palance and Brigitte Bardot in *LE MÉPRIS*.

Hence his concern for the documentary side of film, his desire to provoke in the viewer a kind of sudden awareness. I say "a kind of," because Godard has little further in common with Brecht. His complaisant despair is at the opposite pole from the lucidity of the author of *Mother Courage*. Two of his first films display clearly the influence of Brecht: *Vivre Sa Vie*, with its division into tableaux in order to "distance" the story, in the manner of *Three-Penny Opera*; and even moreso *Les Carabiniers*, whose integral nihilism recalls the nihilism of early Brecht, as in *Drums in the Night*. I am thinking in particular of the scene of the execution of the young communist girl in the woods. The soldiers regard her simply as a pretty girl who could be raped even though she goes on reciting her Marxist catechism. One feels, in Godard, a simultaneous real affection for the character (who believes in an ideal) and a shrug of the shoulders: what good are ideals? The two heroes of *Les Carabiniers*, brutes who do nothing but rape, steal, and kill, and yet are not bad guys, represent all too well what Godard thinks of ordinary humanity left free to follow its instincts. And Brecht says exactly the same thing in *Drums in the Night*. Will Godard someday be capable of transcending this nihilism? Has he realized the intolerable character of his *Petit Soldat*, conceived initially as a fable about the violation of conscience, but ending as a painful confession that this new child of the century is incapable of taking a position on the problems of his time? Godard claims to detest the whimpering humanism of Albert Camus; but his own morose delights leave him worse off still.

*Godard and the "cinéma direct"*: An adventurer of the mind, seeking to seize with the camera everything that happens around him, Godard likes to repeat that the cinema is equally Eisenstein and Rouch: the most rigorous control and unlimited improvisation. From this springs the great interest he took in an article by Richard Leacock on the new camera used by Morris Engel for *Weddings and Ba-*

*bies*, and in the work of Leacock in general. Under the influence of Rouch's *Moi, un Noir*, he experimented with maximum improvisation in his third film, *Une Femme est Une Femme*, while using synchronous sound as far as possible. *Le Mépris* proves that he believes more than ever in the importance of directly recorded, synchronous sound. The long central scene of exposition of the couple's relationship would not make sense without the total continuity that Godard has obtained in the playing and the rendering of dialogue. *Une Femme est Une Femme*, which I consider Godard's best film, remains to this day the only really original attempt to utilise the direct recording techniques for dramatic purposes. With, of course, some refinement on Godard's part—as in the scene in the apartment of Jean-Claude Brialy and Anna Karina, where Anna cries as she leans against the wall. Taken short, and not knowing what to do next, Anna Karina stopped acting and remarked, "C'est ce que disait Agnès [Agnès Varda] ... c'est très beau une femme qui pleure ..." Godard, in the cutting room, retained these reactions of his wife, which fitted admirably into the spirit of the scene. Another capital instance was in a cafe scene, in a long continuous shot; the camera was being hand-held by Raoul Coutard, almost entirely on Anna Karina as she sat at a table talking with Belmondo. A nervous musical rhythm fills the scene—notably a song by Charles Aznavour, "Tu te laisses aller." Thanks to the synchronous sound, we can read this young woman like a book: prisoner of her emotions, intensely unhappy, as if aged by her anxieties and yet visibly ready to start again from zero, to let her vitality come forth.

Why then is Godard so reserved about the experiments of Leacock, or a film like *A Tout Prendre* by Claude Jutra, which he reproaches for their lack of *mise en scène*? Perhaps a description of the shooting of a 16mm color sketch which he did in collaboration with Albert Maysles at the camera, last December, will give the beginnings of an answer. The

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story was nothing more nor less than a re-working of the tale of the missent notes told by Anna Karina in *Une Femme est Une Femme*: a girl believes that she misaddressed two letters, which she had sent to two of her lovers in order to break a rendezvous with the first and arrange one with the other. However, the notes really were properly sent; and the girl makes herself look ridiculous, and loses both lovers. In the sketch, one of the boys is an "action sculptor," the other a mechanic. I found myself, one afternoon, in the miniscule studio of the sculptor, near the Gare Montparnasse. There were the sculptor, the girl (played by a Canadian cover-girl), Godard, Albert Maysles, and a sound engineer loaned by the director Mario Ruspoli. Godard made the actors rehearse very minutely, and Maysles also, for he was to turn, camera in hand, literally around the actors, framing them, losing them, catching them, according to the impulse of the moment. Maysles, who in my opinion is the most brilliant of contemporary cameramen, told me that in the end Godard would have to hold his camera himself—which Godard for the moment, however, did not at all seem to consider. Certainly this Godard-Maysles collaboration went perfectly, and they will find themselves together again soon, perhaps in Montreal to shoot the adventures of a French-Canadian terrorist (though this project seems to be abandoned for the moment), perhaps in New York to follow the life and loves of some bunny from the Playboy clubs.

This is what constitutes the Godard method, in 16mm or in 35mm, with Coutard or Maysles, with or without improvisation: the director seeks to flush out reality, to catch on the wing the expressions and attitudes which, better than any dialogue, can reveal a person's psychology and the dramatic significance of a situation. But Godard does not share the essential aim of the new cinema—to show human relationships stripped bare, to set up new kinds of ties between director, actors, and public; in short to tear off so far as possible all



Jean-Claude Brialy and Anna Karina in  
*UNE FEMME EST UNE FEMME*.

the usual masks of social life. The director of *Breathless*, in the end, is concerned with the graphics of events, which he devotes himself to reconstituting with maximum intensity. He still thinks in terms of a fixed reality, given in advance; the mimicry of the actors, caught by surprise, adds only supplementary touches to portraits whose outlines are established in the director's mind; they do not spring from events which unroll with the participation of everyone. The lesson of *Shadows*, or of the best experiments of Leacock, Maysles, and the Canadians, is lost on him; Godard is bold, but he remains a man of letters, a man of the old order.

He will not go to the edge of truth, risking derangement of the moral comfort of the viewer—or himself.

[Translated by Ernest Callenbach.]